

Seasonality Success

WINNING STRATEGIES FOR PROFITABLE FIRMS



SUMMER 2009
VOL. #3 ISSUE 3



POSITIONING

Smart Marketing Steps to Take Now

In the [2009 PCPS CPA Firm Top Issues Survey](#), client retention was the top issue for firms of all sizes, replacing staffing, which had headed the lists for more than a decade. With a lingering recession and uncertain economic future, finding and keeping good clients has emerged as a pressing concern. But many firms have not engaged in much organized marketing in years because of the strong demand for CPA service during most of the last decade. What steps should practitioners take now to get their efforts back on track? Consultant Jean Caragher offers some tips.

Use the personal touch. Caragher's marketing research shows that personal networking generates the most opportunities for firms, followed by outreach to professional referral sources and seminars. "All three require face-to-face meetings with prospects and clients," she says.

In addition, in their communications, Caragher recommends sending a print newsletter or other communication once every quarter to support newsletter and email efforts. "It's easy to delete an email when you're in a hurry, but when something comes in the mail it might actually attract more attention," she says. She also advises that CPAs who take the time to pen a handwritten note will distinguish themselves from the surge of email and impersonal letters that clients receive.

Adjust to changing times. Firms that are undertaking more active marketing efforts shouldn't expect to use the same techniques that might have worked earlier in the decade. And in many cases, practitioners have grown to rely on word-of-mouth marketing in recent years, given the robust demand and their own good reputations. Caragher advises practitioners to step back and consider how that word-of-mouth marketing got started. "First you had to do something to get people to talk about you," she says, which can happen when CPAs engage more actively in face-to-face marketing efforts.

Dust off those niches. Niche marketing has always been considered a great way to reinforce a firm's expertise, but many practices expanded in recent years to encompass many types of service. Caragher recommends analyzing the client base to identify the most profitable niches and specialties and focusing the firm's efforts on them. "When you have limited time and budget, you want to make sure you're spending your marketing dollars as wisely as you can." The best question for firm leaders to ask themselves: How do we describe our bread and butter clients, and how do we go about getting more?

Consider the client's critical concern. With clients facing their own financial troubles and scrutinizing expenses, Caragher advises that they will be asking themselves this question: Am I getting value for the fees I'm paying? Instead of being blindsided by this question when it is raised, she recommends that CPAs proactively consider how to answer it and emphasize the value they offer with clients whenever possible. Her research shows, too, that more than half of CPA firms have no client satisfaction program, leaving them unable to track or enhance client perceptions. "If you develop a program and execute it, that will differentiate your business," she says. She has also found that the most successful firms are 15 times more likely to have a marketing plan, which allows them to identify key target markets,

track their efforts and reward people for their successful marketing activities. "This kind of effort can be undertaken in firms of every size," she says.